(b) whether Government plan to encourage foreign and domestic tourists to visit the villages in Tamil Nadu to see the Pongal Festival and Jallikattu?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF TOURISM (SHRIMATI RENUKA CHOWDHURY): (a) and (b) Ministry of Tourism has initiated a Rural Tourism scheme to promote Village Tourism as the primary product to spread tourism and it socio-economic benefits to rural regions. The scheme aims at showcasing rural life, art, culture, and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between tourists and locals for a more enriching tourism experience.

The Rural Tourism Scheme is being implemented in 31 villages of India. In Tamil Nadu the scheme is under implementation at Chettinad Heritage Centre (Karaikudi) in Sivaganga District of Tamil Nadu and in Kazhugumalai village in Thoothukudi District of Tamil Nadu (Rural tourism is multi-faceted and entails farm/agricultural tourism/cultural tourism/ nature tourism/adventure tourism and eco tourism). Ministry of Tourism showcases these experiences while promoting and marketing India for the domestic and international markets and also under its Incredible India Campaign. The publicity material of India Tourism highlights these products as also the Pongal and Jallikattu of Tamil Nadu. In addition, Tamil Nadu Tourism also actively promotes Pongal and Jallikattu by printing publicity material for distribution to tourists.

Agriculture Finance by RRBs

*316. DR. T. SUBBARAMI REDDY:
PROF. ALKA BALRAM KSHATRIYA:

Will the Minister of FINANCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether agriculture finance by regional rural banks has been targeted to grow at the rate of 40 per cent during the current financial year;

(b) whether the target for agriculture finance set by RRBs during the current financial year was Rs. 8500 crore which is 40 per cent higher than the figure achieved during the previous financial year;

(c) whether the target for agriculture finance set for RRBs during the fiscal under review is much higher than what is set for commercial cooperative banks; and

(d) if so, what efforts are being made to grow more than 40 per cent in future?

THE MINISTER OF FINANCE (SHRI P. CHIDAMBARAM): (a) and (b) The announcement made by Government on 18.6.2004 on doubling the flow of agriculture credit in 3 years envisages loan disbursement of Rs. 8500 crore during 2004-05 to agriculture and allied activities by RRBs, thereby constituting a growth of 40% over the estimated disbursement by RRBs, of about Rs. 6000 crore, during 2003-04.

(c) The credit disbursement by commercial banks and cooperative banks during the current year is targeted to be Rs. 57000 crore and Rs. 39000 crore respectively representing a growth of 30% over the previous year. A higher target has been fixed for RRBs given stagnation in their lending to agriculture during the last 2 years and the potential for increasing their credit portfolio.

(d) In order to increase agricultural finance by RRBs in future, the following steps are being taken:-

(i) Enhancing coverage of farmers through Kisan Credit Cards and providing investment credit in agriculture and allied sectors to farmers including small and marginal farmers.

(ii) Finance new farmers in the area of every branch and also for select investment activities based on potential for development with technical and refinance support from NABARD.

(iii) Coverage of 5.85 lakh SHGs through credit by banks, including RRBs.

(iv) Restructuring of debts and fresh loans to farmers in areas affected by successive natural calamities, one time settlement scheme for small farmer and marginal farmers, fresh finance for farmers whose earlier debts have been settled through compromise or write off and relief measures for farmers indebted to non institutional lenders.

(v) Making Sponsors Bank accountable for imporved functioning of RRBs.

Reduction of Interest rate on EPF

†*317. SHRIMATI SAVITA SHARDA: Will the Minister of FINANCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether any proposal for reducing interest rate on Employees Provident Fund is under Government's consideration;

(b) if so, the details thereof; and

(c) by when a final decision is likely to be taken in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF FINANCE (SHRI P. CHIDAMBARAM): (a) to (c) The Central Board of Trustees, Employees' Provident Fund has recommended fixing the interim rate of interest at 8.5 per cent on EPF accumulations for the year 2004-05. The matter is under examination in the Ministry of Labour.

Restoration of water bodies

†*318. SHRI RAJ MOHINDER SINGH: Will the Minister of WATER RESOURCES be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have decided to restore five lakhs water bodies in the country;

(b) if so, the total amount estimated to be spent on implementing this scheme; and

(c) the estimated number of the water bodies to be restored in the country, State-wise?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF WATER RESOURCES (SHRI JAI PRAKASH NARAYAN YADAV): (a) to (c) Finance Minister in his Budget Speech, 2004-05 has proposed to launch a scheme to repair, renovate and restore all the Water Bodies in the country that are directly linked to agriculture. To begin with a pilot project in atleast five districts is proposed for the current year at an estimated cost of Rs. 100 crore. The Finance Minister has also announced launching of National Water Resources Development Project after completion of

† Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.